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*The Reverend Abner Waugh:
The "Best Dancer of the Minuet in the State of Virginia"*

Otto Lohrenz

In 1947 George MacLaren Brydon, the historian of the established Church of England in Colonial Virginia, wrote that Abner Waugh, rector of St. Mary's Parish in Caroline County from 1771 to 1805, acquired the reputation of being "the best dancer of the minuet in the State of Virginia."¹ Who was Abner Waugh? What can be learned of his life and career? Of what significance, if any, was his dancing ability? Most importantly, what was his rank in society?

Scholars do not agree about the social position of the Anglican clergy in colonial Virginia. Some historians hold that they were full-fledged members of the gentry. Arthur P. Middleton, for example, thinks the ministers were gentlemen who "habitually move[d] in the social circles of the upper class," frequently "married into the most prominent families," and "were remarkably well-to-do." Other historians, led by Rhys Isaac, assert that the clerical candidates stemmed from inferior social levels, that as ministers they suffered from a "negative image," a "low status," and a "lack of rank and influence."² The following biographical sketch will attempt to determine which historical appraisal best characterizes Abner Waugh.

The progenitor of the Waugh family in colonial Virginia was John Waugh, who came over from England about 1660 and served as rector of parishes in Stafford County from about 1667 to 1700. He was a man of good education and considerable ability whom the Virginia authorities disciplined for marrying couples without license or banns, and for leading a popular anti-papist tumult at the time of the expulsion of King James II from England in 1688. The voters of Stafford elected John Waugh to the House of Burgesses in 1699 but the members denied him a seat, considering him ineligible because of his clerical status. John Waugh acquired a large quantity of land by patenting 6,350 acres on the headwaters of Potomac Creek in 1691 and by purchasing additional tracts in Stafford and neighboring counties.³

The children and grandchildren of John Waugh produced a large number of descendants. They married into upper middle class families and the males became landed gentlemen who served as vestrymen, justices of the peace, sheriffs, and militia officers. One of John Waugh's sons and two grandsons sat as burgesses for Stafford County.⁴

Our subject, Abner Waugh, was born in Orange County on

January 17, 1746. He was the great grandson of John Waugh and Elizabeth Madison, the grandson of Alexander Waugh (d.1722) and Catherine Webb, and the son of Alexander (d.1792) and Sarah Waugh.⁵ The father was a landowner and prosperous planter in Orange County, a vestryman of St. Thomas's Parish, and a justice of the peace of Orange County. The mother, identified as Sarah by her husband in his will, was "connected either to Battaile or Taliaferro families, or both;" the two clans were recognized members of the gentry.⁶

Abner Waugh's matrimonial partner descended from the upper social class. About 1774 he married Philadelphia Claiborne, the widow of John Carter, who had died the previous year. He was the grandson of Robert "King" Carter and the son of Charles Carter and Anne Byrd of Cleve in King George County. The Carters and Byrds were two of the most prominent families of colonial Virginia. One daughter, Ann Carter, issued from the union of Philadelphia Claiborne and John Carter. Philadelphia Claiborne was the daughter of Philip Whitehead Claiborne and Elizabeth (Dandridge) Claiborne of Liberty Hall in King William County. The Claibornes and Dandrighes were included among the first families of Virginia. The freeholders of King William chose Philip Whitehead Claiborne as burgess for their county shortly before his demise in 1771.⁷ With his spouse, Waugh fathered three daughters, two of whom had offspring and left numerous descendants.⁸ By his marriage Waugh had greatly enlarged his network of kinship, enhanced his social position, and improved his economic circumstances.

In colonial Virginia, as T. H. Breen has observed, each county had a "few gentry families" who "dominated civil, ecclesiastical, and military affairs."⁹ Clearly the families of Waugh and his wife were among those who oversaw local government and even participated in provincial affairs.

From 1765 to 1768 Waugh studied at the College of William and Mary, and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree. About two years later he declared himself a candidate for the Anglican priesthood and prepared himself for the ministry by private study under the tutelage of Jonathan Boucher, the well-known rector of St. Mary's Parish in Caroline County. During that period Waugh may have been a teacher in the large school Boucher managed at the parish glebe.¹⁰

Since there was no bishop in America, an ordinand had to hazard the voyage to England to seek the blessing of the bishop of London, the nominal diocesan of the colonies. With him, Waugh carried testimonials, dated July 1770, from three local ministers. Patrick Henry, rector of St. Paul's Parish, called him "a young Gentleman ... of Virtue and good Morals, and well qualified for the Sacred Office." Jonathan Boucher, then rector of St. Anne's Parish in Maryland, and James Marye,

rector of St. George's Parish in Virginia, sent a joint letter to the bishop and emphasized the "blameless tenor of his Life ... the orthodoxy of his principles, and the Purity of his Morals" and termed him "a very meet and worthy candidate for holy orders." In November 1770 James Horrocks, the bishop's commissary in Virginia, and William Nelson, the president of the Council and acting governor, added their endorsements. A candidate was to present a title, a firm promise of employment after ordination, and the St. Mary's Parish vestrymen of Caroline County, "fully persuaded of the Soundness of his Morals, and the Purity of his Life," agreed to receive Waugh as rector upon his return in holy orders.¹¹

Waugh had no problems in London. After examining chaplains found that he met the Anglican standards of character, orthodoxy, and knowledge, the bishop of London ordained him deacon on February 24, 1771 and priest on March 10 and the next day licensed him to officiate in Virginia. As required, Waugh also took the oaths of allegiance and canonical obedience to the king and to the Church of England.¹²

After his return, the vestry of St. Mary's installed Waugh as rector of the parish. He succeeded his mentor, Jonathan Boucher, who asserted that the vestry had elected Waugh upon his "sole recommendation." Evidently Boucher was confident that Waugh would be a very good parson. The new priest's chief duty was that of conducting Sunday morning services in Mount Church, the only worship center in the parish. One historian of Caroline County called it "one of the largest and most beautiful churches in Virginia in that day." After Waugh's resignation in 1805, Mount Church was converted into the Rappahannock Academy, which functioned successfully until the twentieth century when the building was abandoned; it soon fell into complete ruin and was finally demolished. Mount Church boasted an English organ, "an unusual thing in Virginia at that time." The historian of Port Royal, the largest town in St. Mary's Parish, thought it probable that the vestry had authorized Waugh to select an organ for Mount Church while he was in England. Some writers have insisted that the organ eventually found its way to the Smithsonian Institute and is on display there today.¹³

The minister also officiated at baptisms, marriages, and funerals for which he was entitled to perquisites. According to law his annual salary was 16,000 pounds of tobacco, plus the percentages for cask and shrinkage. The minister was also to have the use of a farm or plantation, called a glebe, of at least two hundred acres with a suitable rectory and appropriate outbuildings for agricultural production.¹⁴

The glebe of St. Mary's Parish was situated near New Post, eleven miles northwest of Mount Church. According to Jonathan

Boucher, the preceding rector, there was "a good house" on the glebe and the acreage was productive. Waugh apparently lived on the glebe until 1776, when he qualified as a member of Caroline's committee of safety. Thereafter, he evidently rented it to a tenant. In a newspaper advertisement in 1777 he identified his location as "near Port Royal, in King George County." Port Royal was on the south side of the Rappahannock River in Caroline County while King George County was on the north side of that river. In 1782, Waugh paid his personal property taxes in King George County. In 1783, a court document referred to Abner and Philadelphia Waugh as residents of Port Royal in Caroline County and as "late of the County of King George and now of the County of Caroline." Thereafter he and his family made their abode in Port Royal, "a place of no small importance" at the time, according to one historian of Caroline County.¹⁵ For an unknown period of time Waugh was a teacher in the "three-room Public School House on the Public Square in Port Royal," which had been constructed in 1771-1772.¹⁶

None of Waugh's sermons have survived and only a few references to his preaching have been found. On March 26, 1775 an indentured servant recorded in his journal that he went to the Mount Church in Caroline County, and "heard Mr. Waugh preach his text was the first verse of Ecclesiastes 12." Unfortunately, he made no further comment about the sermon. The verse reads: "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them." On December 27, 1783 Waugh "delivered a most excellent sermon" to the members of the local Masonic Lodge. Edmund Pendleton, the well-known churchman, jurist, and patriot of Caroline County, wrote about Waugh's preaching and officiating in complimentary terms in 1801.¹⁷ Moreover, since there were no registered complaints about his preaching, character, or conduct, it can be inferred that his performance in and out of the pulpit was most acceptable.

Waugh was not very active in clerical activities in Virginia. He did not take part in the Fund for the Relief of Distressed Widows and Orphans of Deceased Clergymen; that is, unlike many other clergymen, he did not preach a sermon at the annual meetings of subscribers or act as a trustee of the Fund. The newspapers of Williamsburg, which have been indexed, identified clerical participants of the Fund each year and Waugh's name cannot be found.¹⁸ Waugh witnessed the attempt by some of his peers to petition the king for an American bishop in the early 1770s, but he took no part in what became a bitter controversy.¹⁹

Waugh revealed interest in his church and profession by recommending James Marshall, who had been his schoolmate at the College of William and Mary, for holy orders in 1775. After ordination

Marshall reportedly served briefly as rector of Nottoway Parish before his untimely death.²⁰ Beginning in 1785, after the separation of church and state, clerical and lay delegates met annually in Richmond to organize and govern the Episcopal Church in Virginia. Waugh attended the convention in 1792 as a clerical delegate from St. Mary's Parish, a sign of his interest in the welfare of the church.²¹ Why he absented himself from these conventions before and after that date is not known.

A better indication of Waugh's commitment to his calling and church occurred in the early years of the Revolution when the Virginia state legislature ended clerical stipends from public sources as of January 1, 1777.²² Thereafter, salaries had to be raised by subscription from parishioners unaccustomed to voluntary contributions, often leaving the minister with a very meager income. On March 15, 1801 Waugh addressed this problem in a letter to Thomas Miller, who was investigating the claims of British creditors in Caroline County. According to Miller, Waugh owed a total of £177 sterling to four British companies; the debts had been due in 1776-1777. Waugh explained that the "resources for the payment of these debts and the credit upon which they were contracted were no longer within my reach after the year 1777 (sic, 1776)" and that the "scanty surplus of voluntary contributions" was hardly sufficient to cover his other obligations.²³ It seems doubtful that Waugh ever paid these debts in full.

That Waugh persisted as rector of St. Mary's Parish until his resignation in 1805, with only small and sporadic contributions, underscores his loyalty and dedication to the Anglican-Episcopal Church of Virginia. In 1806 he took charge of St. George's Parish in Spotsylvania, but was almost immediately obliged to relinquish it because of ill health. Death came before the end of the year. William Meade, the well-known chronicler of the colonial church and the bishop of the Virginia Episcopal diocese from 1841 to 1862, quoted a correspondent who wrote that Waugh "was not engaged in the active duties of the ministry for many of the latter years of his life." That, however, may be an error. Later Meade contradicted this contributor when he stated that the prominent Baylor family worshipped in Mount Church "until the death [sic, resignation] of the Rev. Mr. Waugh, after which time the church had no minister." Waugh married at least three couples in Caroline County in 1805. His reference in 1801 to "scanty contributions," mentioned above, as well as his attempt to officiate in St. George's the last year of his life, indicate that he was active until his death.²⁴

Waugh apparently had a good relationship with the parishioners of St. George's, and presumably earlier with those of St. Mary's. In his letter of resignation as rector of St. George's, Waugh expressed his appreciation to the parishioners for the "high sense of their friendly

regard and general attention to him" during his brief incumbency. The "loss of health, and consequently of power of being any longer useful," he continued, "compelled him to relinquish" the cure. In bidding the parishioners farewell he wished them "individually and generally, as much comfort, ease, and happiness in their life as may be consistent with a more exalted degree of happiness in the next."²⁵ The latter sentence suggests that Waugh could be witty and humorous.

When the quarrel with the mother country began, Waugh took the side of the colonies. In October 1774 the Continental Congress organized the Continental Association, an intercolonial boycott of British commerce. The voters in each unit of local government in the several colonies were to choose committees of safety to execute the Association within their respective jurisdictions. The patriots in virtually all of the counties in Virginia complied with this directive.²⁶

The freeholders of Caroline selected their first county committee of twenty members on November 10, 1774, but Waugh was not one of them. Congress had not fixed the number of individuals to constitute this local group and in August 1775 the Third Convention, one of Virginia's extralegal assemblies, decreed that "twenty one of the most discreet, fit and able men" would comprise each committee in the province. In compliance, the voters elected one of twenty-one individuals on November 9, 1775; the second group had five new members but Waugh was not one of them. Because of alleged improprieties, the Fourth Convention ordered the voters to choose a new committee. Therefore, on February 1, 1776 the electors of the county picked another committee of twenty-one, and one of the two new members was Waugh.²⁷

It was not uncommon for the parsons of Virginia to serve on the local revolutionary committees. The freeholders elected at least twenty-nine of the clerics to committees of safety. Ten were chairmen of their committees and two were chairmen *pro tempore*.²⁸ The inclusion of Waugh in the committee of safety reveals that he was an accepted member of the upper stratum of local society, for scholars have found that the ruling gentry controlled the elections, and limited membership to those belonging to "the traditional power structure of the counties."²⁹

Immediately, Waugh was an active committeeman. The day after the election he and four others became a subcommittee for the area north of the Mattaponi River in Caroline, and the next week the committee added him to the subcommittee assigned the task of disposing "of the donations collected from this County for the use of our Bostonian brethren." In about eight weeks, however, Waugh found it advisable to remove himself from the committee. One historian of Caroline County has found that "pressure from high churchmen forced ... Waugh to resign ...much against his will, in an attempt to avoid

dissension in his church brought on by [his] taking part in political activities. . . ."³⁰ His resignation to avoid a division in his parish suggests that Waugh placed the interests of his church above his personal inclinations.

Waugh also supported the insurgents by serving as chaplain of the Second Virginia Regiment from October 24, 1775 until March 2, 1776. The colonel of the regiment was William Woodford, whose plantation was in St. Mary's Parish, where he was a church warden and member of the vestry. The colonel and chaplain were well-acquainted and were personal friends. Waugh was in the field with the soldiers during the fighting in the Norfolk area in that period and twice was the courier of messages from the colonel to the Fourth Convention.³¹ Thirteen of Virginia's Anglican clergymen, including Waugh, acted as chaplains to military units during the Revolution.³²

Edmund Pendleton was Waugh's good friend. In 1788 the delegates to the Virginia convention, which ratified the federal constitution in Richmond, "unanimously" elected Waugh as chaplain. His duty was "to attend every morning to read prayers." One morning, when debate about a controversial issue was anticipated, delegates observed that Waugh's voice "had a tone of more than usual solemnity" during his prayer. His selection was an honor as well as a financial favor since it entailed a stipend. Paul Carrington, delegate from Charlotte County, nominated Waugh as chaplain, but no doubt it was Pendleton, a delegate from Caroline and president of the convention, who was responsible for Waugh's election.³³

As a young man, well before Waugh's time, Pendleton had been clerk of the St. Mary's vestry. Later he established his estate, Edmundsbury, in Drysdale Parish and in 1779, by a redrawing of parish lines and the creation of St. Asaph's Parish, his plantation fell into the new parish. St. Mary's, Drysdale, and St. Asaph's, as well as St. Margaret's, were all in Caroline County. As residents of the same county, Waugh and Pendleton were well acquainted and on friendly terms.³⁴

On July 30, 1801 Pendleton dispatched a letter to James Madison, then secretary of state, asking him to assist Waugh in his quest to become chaplain of the House of Representatives. Waugh was "growing in years," Pendleton began, and was "anxious to settle, in some town, to avoid the fatigue of traveling on Country duty." Pendleton recommended Waugh as "an agreeable preacher of the most tolerant spirit" and "an able tutor of youth, and as a man ... amongst the most unexceptionable." Madison's help would "be esteemed a particular kindness to me," he concluded.³⁵ Waugh did not become chaplain of the House. Possibly he did not apply, was an unsuccessful candidate, or declined the offer when given. What help, if any, Madison may have

offered is not known.

Pendleton's reference to "the fatigue of traveling" indicates that Waugh was still acting as parson in 1801. Mount Church stood four miles northwest of Port Royal and thus Waugh had to traverse that distance twice each Sunday. Pendleton evidently used the phrase, "an agreeable preacher of the most tolerant spirit," to assure Madison that Waugh would not offend the Representatives who professed a variety of Christian faiths. It seems clear that Pendleton considered Waugh a most capable clergyman with excellent character.

Waugh's dancing ability had broad social connotations because it reinforced his social position. Gentry society in eighteenth century Virginia was very competitive. "Indeed, competition was a major factor shaping the character of face-to-face relationships among the colony's gentlemen," according to T. H. Breen. The planters engaged in a "constant struggle against real and imagined rivals to obtain more lands, additional patronage, and high tobacco prices." The gentlemen also attempted to display their superiority and dominance by gambling, horse-racing, and dancing.³⁶

Colonial Virginians were extraordinarily fond of dancing and it was important for them to be proficient in the various dances. Special tutors taught dancing to the children of the gentry, and sons sent to England for their education were not only expected to study the languages, philosophy, and mathematics, but also to become accomplished dancers. The upper classes gave balls, often lasting for several days, for a variety of occasions and dancing was a primary activity, and the minuet, Waugh's specialty, was probably the principal dance.³⁷ Performances were competitive, were closely watched, and consensual judgments about the skills of the various dancers speedily became known. Waugh's superior dancing brought admiration from the ladies, a mixture of approbation and envy from the gentlemen, and a measure of self-esteem. By besting his rivals on the dance floor, Waugh won emblematic victories over them and strengthened, and even elevated, his place in the social hierarchy.³⁸ The evangelical dissenters, the Presbyterians and Baptists, objected to dancing as immoral and sinful, but the Anglican churchmen considered it perfectly innocent.³⁹

There is no evidence that Waugh demonstrated his social standing by racing horses himself, but he was involved in the breeding of horses, an activity the gentry reserved for themselves. Led by John Baylor of New Market in Caroline, the area had become an important center for horse breeding in Virginia. Sanders Race Track was located just outside the town of Port Royal. In 1777 Waugh announced that "Appollonius, a beautiful bay colt" with excellent blood lines, which he evidently owned, was for sale.⁴⁰ He probably had additional connections with the sport of gentlemen.

Waugh also qualified as a gentleman by reason of the amount of his personalty and realty. In 1782 he paid taxes for twenty-eight slaves. Philadelphia Carter, by virtue of her dower in the estate of John Carter, brought significant resources to the marriage. Included were the plantation of 525 acres in King George County, "commonly called and known by the name of Cleve," and, adjacent to Cleve, 1244 acres of woodland and a half interest in an undivided pocosin of unknown acreage. Waugh and his wife leased Cleve to Landon Carter, brother of the deceased John Carter, for eight thousand pounds of tobacco per annum. In 1782 Waugh acquired 3,001 acres of land in Caroline County from Charles Carter, Jr. This tract contained good land, its value for tax purposes being assessed at £2,338 Virginia currency.⁴¹ As one writer has noted, only two members of the Caroline committee of safety possessed more land in the county: Edmund Pendleton had 3,875 acres and George Baylor 3,360 acres.⁴²

According to a short newspaper obituary, Abner Waugh died on September 13, 1806 at the seat of John Taylor of Caroline, as he styled himself, the prominent agriculturist and political philosopher. What purpose or occasion had taken him to Hazelwood, Taylor's home, is not known, but his presence there at his death suggests that he and Taylor enjoyed a friendly relationship.⁴³ The site of his interment is unknown. It is thought that his spouse, daughters, and stepdaughter all survived him. Since many county records of Caroline have been destroyed, Waugh's will and the inventory of his personal property are not available.

The records permit the conclusion that Waugh was a respected and capable minister of the Anglican-Episcopal Church. He was loyal and dedicated to his church and profession, continuing as parson even though small voluntary gifts had replaced fixed salaries. This is not to say that he was without fault for, as indicated, he might have been more active in provincial church affairs. His family connections by birth and marriage, his moderate wealth, his college education and cultural style, his general abilities, the dignity and influence of his clerical office, the force of his moral character, and his excellent personal attributes had evidently earned him a high standing in his community. His membership on the county's revolutionary committee, his relationship with leading gentlemen in his locality, such as Woodford, Pendleton, and Taylor, and his recognized dancing ability also indicate that he was an accepted member of the gentry of Virginia. Middleton's scenario best describes Waugh's rank in society.

As a gentleman, how representative of his clerical contemporaries was Waugh? Scholars need to find out by an exhaustive examination of the record and by a close scrutiny of the lives and careers of numbers of clergymen. Such inquiries will, in all likelihood, reveal that

Waugh's social standing was not at all unique among the ministers of the revolutionary generation.

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